

After Peter: Stories from the End of the World

Note to Historians: Alexander the Great was an Asshole

Peter was never squandered or taken for granted as a resource. I blessed him with meaningful work, a job as my existential janitor, my standby, my narrator for outrages from which discretion restrained me, as a standup comedian delivering my jokes, and as a gadfly free to take potshots at anyone, especially that murderous asshole Nixon and his coldblooded hatchet man Kissinger, at no risk to myself.

Authors are sometimes mistaken for our protagonists, especially when we write in the first person.

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Readers always wanted Salinger to be Holden and Bellow to be Moses Herzog or, my wittier favorite, Charlie Citrine. But when readers make errors like that, writers can't be responsible for the miscues. That's part of what drove Salinger nuts, I think, gross reader errors, plus the critics, pirouetting from fans to predators, never understanding much of what it takes to write books, especially books like Salinger wrote, anyway. But what I meant about using Peter was that I could write almost any shit I wanted and get away with it because it was a book, a fiction, a pack of conditional lies planted in a made up world, stories spun out that kept me, Peter really, the most appropriately attired actor on the set. As Mel Brooks said, it's good to be king.

Stirring the chemistry of Peter, pumping blood through his veins, I volunteered stories from my life for him to mess around with but skipped the failures and embarrassments, the times I related so well to Brautigan's self-reference of being dead and unable to attract a female fly, or when I sent my poems off to a publisher by parcel post, slower than the pony express, to save money, and flattered myself that the delay meant my verses were being held, entrancing the publisher. I left out the girl who ditched me in the middle of the night at that remote airport on a windy hill above Binghamton and other unflattering fuck-ups. Yes, I used Peter, and I would miss him. But as some clown has surely said at Keebler, that's the way the cookie crumbles. Time to sweep up and muddle along.

Cookies crumble, with or without milk. My personal preference is coffee, in case you're stopping by later. Castles are built and torn down. A life proceeds from birth to salvage and destruction as a kind of

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rickety vehicle you might have some fun with, if you're lucky and you want it. Young, you're ordered to take the road ahead seriously, like you have a mission you must discover or risk wasting your precious resources on frivolous bullshit. That message is feverishly drummed into us. Frivolous, maybe, but at minimum, whatever you're doing is not as esteemed as your calling, the mission for which you were placed so dramatically on this Earth by the Supreme Being Of Your Choice. Your work awaits. Just ask the judges, but don't bother asking them to be a little more clear. When you do, they just mumble louder.

In retrospect, though, all that bloated, high-sounding garbage just sucks the zip out of life.

Let's be clear now. Alexander the Great had a mission, he had work, a calling to slaughter on a scale surpassing ordinary comprehension. You and I don't have any impulse at all like that, no matter what you think. Even lacking empathy, we'd tire of the carnage once it became same old, same old. Alexander never got bored, by all accounts, with ravaging communities, ethnic groups, enclaves, families, etc. It was in his blood and bones, like anyone else granted a mission by God or gods.

On the positive side, Alexander's gift made him an efficient and, according to historians, praiseworthy mass murderer who dragged a red ribbon of terror from Greece to India in the Fourth Century, BCE. You probably have too much decency in your heart to be Alexander. Not many, really, are born both heartless and intensely cruel. The man, leveraging power inherited from his assassinated father, did pretty much nothing but oversee, hands on, brutal wars until he was poi-

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soned at the tender age of thirty-three, a privileged bisexual many centuries before it was acceptable for other than kings and toffs. That, in my opinion, is mispent youth. You and I may make clown-worthy messes of our lives, but we don't leave behind a river of blood streaming between chopped body parts, do we? Not me, anyway.

Having a calling is overrated and probably overestimated too. The misperception is born when we find something we like to do enough that we practice it even if we're paid little or nothing for our efforts — a big sacrifice and a revelation in a culture crippled by crazy capitalist infusions of wisdom. For example, while Poe drank himself silly, watching the love of his life separate body from soul at the grinding pace of a glacier, like a maple tapped in December, leaving him an empty tank only alcohol could refill, the fact that he wrote poetry and stories was taken to mean he had a calling. But what if he really just had to get away from the horror, hated the idea of day labor and was so socially inept he dealt with pain by rolling it over into words, most of them indirect? (This idea is partially stolen from Mason William's song about Dylan Thomas where he reports that, "His blood turned to words.") We know Poe couldn't cut it as a military man, God bless him. As far as we can tell, apart from writing, he loved only Virginia, booze and gambling, but none of these are acceptable as a calling. What if writing was the only thing he had the gift for doing well?

The public loves you for your work after you die, while during your miserable life, as your legs and arms are taking you mysteriously through the streets of

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Baltimore, they let you collapse into the chilling mud alone and most don't give a shit if you get up or not, maybe because you're an impolite pain in the ass everyone avoids like crabgrass when you're sober. But they like what you write. You've got a calling, a mission to fill pages until the next hotshot comes along. That's your consolation, the calling that redeems you.

When you look at the record, you find the recipe most likely to earn what fans anoint as a calling, like painting iconic landscapes or sending savage troops into battle, is enthusiasm for a skill folded like whipped egg whites into an abundant opportunity to practice. It helps if you have a rich Daddy, obviously, as both Alexander and Edgar the Great did. Others, equally gifted, lack the time to fart around and end up working at the mall, for example, instead of pounding away at their calling, which nobody recognizes anyway because they are, after all, just a debris of jerks collecting checks from the exploitive retail giant, Walmart.

But let's take up bloodthirsty Alexander the Great, the man with a mission, again. Tutored by his father (also a ruthless, unfeeling mass murderer), given unlimited opportunities to practice his craft after Dad was taken up to heaven, Alex became a juggernaut, doing little but leading slaughters and planning to lead slaughters all his grownup years, which — praise the lord — were mercifully few. You need that interest in killing on a large scale plus the chance to do it without serious obstacles to become an Alexander. That's the point. Historians love that stuff. They fall all over themselves finding cool things to say about Alexander, excusing his most notable quality, the mental defect that rendered him unable to let the suffering of others

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dull his pleasure in killing them in efficient clusters with their clinging loved ones. Like Rush Limbaugh, a thug without the talent or anything resembling charisma, absent opportunity, plus fat and dishonest. Or maybe the secret is that the rest of the world has an uncanny knack, a mission, if you will, to attract the brutality affordable only for the rich and powerful, but not to hold it against them. It still does take two to tango, n'est-ce pas? In the modern context, we still vote into leadership candidates propped up by prickly oligarchs who'd be happy to let you die in the cold on the streets of Baltimore, soaked in your own urine and mental illness, don't we?

Somebody should write a book about that. The critics could fawn over it or take the opportunity to show off their own verbal prowess by attacking it, all in the game. Probably, someone already has, and if it attracted critics, they treated themselves to the fantasy that art is actually about themselves. You see that shit in the *New York Times* every day.

No, give me a rickety vehicle and the exculpating blindness of historians. Nobody ever wanted to poison me enough to go through with it. Well, maybe one or two did, but they lacked conviction or opportunity. As for killing, I declined when offered the unfettered opportunity by Lyndon Johnson's superannuated proxies, at the risk of my own freedom, alienating friends and family and leaving scar tissue like an emotional relief map everywhere. But Jesus, I had fun, sadness and adventure. And I assigned whatever he wanted of it, run through the filters, to Peter.

Pretty cool, right?